

KING OF CHILDREN

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According to an ancient Jewish myth there must live on earth at any one time a few righteous people. Only the existence of these righteous ones justifies humanity's continuation in the eyes of the Lord; otherwise, God would turn his face from earth and we all would perish.

As long as they live these righteous people must remain unknown to all other men. Only after their death may we discover their identity. Then some do become known, and posterity can recognize their extraordinary virtue and come to admire them, their lives, and their deeds.

One such person was Dr. Janusz Korczak, a Polish-Jewish children's writer and educator. He was born Henryk Goldszmit but he would be by his pseudonym Janusz Korczak.

Korczak was a trained medical doctor who specialized in children's diseases. He founded the first national children's newspaper, trained teachers and worked in juvenile courts defending children's rights. He set up an orphanage to take care of destitute children.

Korczak loved children deeply; he devoted all the moments of his life to them. He studied them and understood them more thoroughly than most. Since he knew children, he did not idealize them. As there are good and bad adults, all kinds and sorts, so too Korczak knew there are all kinds of children. Korczak saw children for what they were, and was at all times deeply convinced of their integrity. He suffered from the fact that often children were treated badly, not given the credit they deserved for their intelligence and basic honesty.

His books *How to Love a Child* and *The Child's Right to Respect* gave parents and teachers new insights into child psychology. His latter book became the basis for the first draft of the United Nation's Charter on Rights of Children. Generations of young people had grown up on his books, especially the classic *King Matt the First*, which tells of the adventures and tribulations of a boy king who aspires to bring reforms to his subjects. He set up orphanages in the dark slums of Warsaw and lived among children in real life, not just in the imagination, for he saw them as the salvation of the world. The children in the orphanage often performed the famous play *The Post Office* written by Rabindranath Tagore.

Korczak felt that within each child there burned a moral spark that could vanquish the darkness at the core of human nature. To prevent that spark from being extinguished, one had to love and nurture the young, make it possible for them to believe in truth and justice. The titles of his books are suggestive of his innate sensitivity – *Confessions of a Butterfly*.

Because Korczak was determined to live both as Pole and a Jew in pre-war Poland, he was not above criticism. Jews saw him as a renegade who wrote in Polish rather than Yiddish or Hebrew. The right-wing Poles never forgot that he was a Jew. The radical socialists and the communists of the interwar period saw him as a conservative because he was not politically active, and the conservatives saw him as a radical because of his socialist sympathies.

On August 6, 1942 the Nazis ordered the two hundred children of the orphanage to be taken to the train station, to be packed into railroad carriages. Korczak, knew that the carriages were to take the children to their death in the gas chambers of Treblinka. Korczak meant everything to the children. He was their father, mother, friend, philosopher and guide. Despite many persuasions Korczak steadfastly remained with the children until their end.

To assuage the children's anxiety, Korczak told them that they were all going for an outing in the country. On the appointed day he had the oldest child lead them, holding high the flag of hope, a gold four-leaf clover on a field of green — the emblem of the orphanage. As always, even in this terrible situation, Korczak had arranged things so that a child rather than an adult would be the leader of other children. He walked immediately behind this leader, holding the hands of the two smallest children. Behind them marched all the other children, four by four, in excellent order, sure of themselves, as they had been helped to be during their stay at the orphanage.

Korczak sacrificed himself to keep his trust with the children, when he could have easily saved himself. With his many friends in high places it was very easy for him to escape. But as the head and leading light for thirty years of the Jewish orphanage in Warsaw, Korczak was determined not to desert any of the children who had put their trust in him. As he said to those who beseeched him to save himself: "One does not leave a sick child in the night," and "One does not leave children in a time like this."

The children remained calm throughout, as if in silent protest, or contempt of the murderers. One of the German guards told Korczak to leave. But

Korczak refused, as before, to separate himself from the children, and went with them to the gas chamber in Treblinka.

Korczak realized early that children were the butt of the entire adult world and he coined the revolutionary slogan: “Children are the oldest proletariat of the world”.

One reason why he is virtually unknown in India is that he wrote in Polish. Several of his books have now been translated into English but they are still inaccessible. Korczak’s saintly life has also inspired a few films. As he was killed in 1942 by the Nazis all his works are in the public domain. But they are very difficult to get. Hopefully, someday a comprehensive website on Janusz Korczak will make all his works available. This will enable his works to be translated in many languages. However a wonderful biography of Janusz Korczak titled *King of Children* by Betty Jean Lifton was recently uploaded on the web. This amazing book can be downloaded from <http://arvindguptatoys.com>